

THE NEGRO WORKER IN THE WHITE COLLAR FIELDS

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The greatest bottleneck in the production of equal economic opportunity for Negroes, exists in the white collar field of employment. The efforts of hundreds of stalwart Americans to erase the blot of discrimination against members of minority groups from the conscience of decent America, have fallen far short of the white collar areas. Negroes are kept out of the millstream of white collar employment in patterns that are a challenge to the most intelligent leadership that America can muster. These fields of employment represent the new 1948 line of demarcation between the rubble of racial prejudices torn down during the war, and the serene, supercilious, and stubborn prejudices still being brutishly clung to by many Americans.

White collar fields of employment have now become the new front line of the battle for just, fair, and equal employment opportunities for Americans of color.

In view of these facts, it is imperative that we take inventory. We need to be completely aware of what has happened in terms of the employment status of Negroes. In order to do this let us take a minute to get together on some proper basis of evaluation.

First, I want to state that I am excluding the field of Art and the professions from the area of white collar work. I propose, rather, that by white collar fields, we mean work areas including that large category of salaried employees lying generally between the artists, professionals, and policy-making individuals on the one hand, and production workers, laborers, and domestics on the other hand.

I do not wish to attach any unusual social differentiation in terms of upper class, middle class, or lower class, but merely to stimulate a meeting of our minds

on what type of occupations constitute the white collar field.

This discussion is concerned with the status of the Negro with respect to white collar employment, and the importance of serious attention being given to that status.

At this point it is in order that we review certain significant facts about the employment of Negroes in other fields. As we make comparisons of such employment, we should become clearer about the problem with respect to white collar occupations.

We have just witnessed one of the most remarkable advances along the lines of employment that can be recounted by any group of people in America. At no time before in the history of the United States has any racial, cultural, or ethnic group moved into occupations previously foreign to it in such large numbers, and functioned so well in those new occupations, as the Negro group has done during World War II.

During a period fraught with the exaggerations of ordinary personnel problems and the problems of worker adjustment, there arose conclusive data that emphasized the fact that the adjustment of the individual Negro in occupations that were new to him, did not vary from the norm, or the mean, of the individual adjustment of newly hired white workers. This was true even though the white workers' relatives or friends, neighborhood and general environment, had had previous experience in the occupations in question. Now there is proof of what intelligent leadership has always maintained, that the same yardstick used for hiring Negro workers that is used for hiring white workers will produce a work force ready for uniform average production.

1940

Let us briefly crystalize the import of the unprecedented progress Negroes have made. What was the general employment status of Negroes before the War? The 1940 census showed that Negro men, forming only 10.3 per cent of the total male working

population, composed 80.2 per cent of all males in domestic service, 21 per cent of all laborers, and 21 per cent of all farm laborers and foremen. Negro women, representing 18.8 per cent of the total female working population, were 48.6 per cent of all female domestics and 28.9 per cent of all female laborers. In other words, 71.2 per cent of all employed Negro men were laborers, farm foreman or in domestic service; and 73.5 per cent of all employed Negro women were laborers or in domestic service.

Let's make a comparison. We note that in 1940, more than 70 per cent of employed Negro women were engaged in service occupations; however, only 22.4 per cent of employed white women were engaged in the same occupations. Moreover, among clerical and sales workers were found almost one third of employed white women, but only about one per cent of employed Negro women.

There is a significant inference to be drawn here. There is a challenge for anyone concerned about the dignity of Negro womanhood. There must be opportunities made in clerical and sales occupations for the Negro woman to become divested of the shackles of service occupations and to spread forth her abilities, and her personality. This is not without awareness of the outstanding Negro women found in every Negro community, that such shackles are broken off; it is, rather, with very great concern about the tens of thousands of Negro women who would choose white collar work and do a very efficient job if allowed the opportunity.

1942

Let us refer to the record again. According to the War Manpower Commission, in July 1942, Negroes represented only 2.5 per cent of the total employed workers on war production. Through the efforts of innumerable stable Americans that percentage had risen to 8.3 per cent by November 1944. An increase of from 2.5 per cent to 8.3 per cent

in two years.

An analysis of that reveals, for instance, such large increases between 1942 and 1944 as from 5.7 per cent to 12.4 per cent, and from 0 to 7.6 per cent in the ship-building and plastics industries, respectively.

Those increases represent a quantitative advance, distinctly important in terms of bread and butter. However, they also reveal a qualitative lag. That is, they also represent the discriminatory channelling of Negro workers into only certain industries.

For some the victory of getting jobs in large numbers was too consuming to warrant much, if any, concern about this. Everybody was busy then. Negroes, just as other American citizens, wanted to do their share in the production of material for War. Yet, some were not fooled. Here and there there were people in Urban Leagues and similar agencies and other plain citizens who were impelled to greater effort by the over-all picture. Here and there there were some who dug in to eliminate the quiet force of discrimination that was piling Negroes principally into "war industries".

Resistance

In Chicago, a committee composed of Negro and white women representing important social, civic, and religious groups was organized by the Woman's Division of the Chicago Urban League in December of 1943 to secure employment for Negroes as clerks in department stores located in the Loop. The list of participating groups resembled a Who's Who of civic organizations. Some real effort was put forth along modern and intelligent lines. The executives of the ten largest department stores in Chicago were interviewed.

I could go on with interesting techniques, but suffice it to say that the excuses

of the store executives for not hiring Negroes as sales clerks, despite the obvious wishes of the better leadership of Chicago.

In the South, efforts in such directions as Negro sales clerks or Negroes working in practically any white collar capacity not directly serving Negroes, have met with adamant resistance. In the far West, things are a little better; but, there also, there has been no integration of Negroes into the sales forces of downtown department stores. In Flint, Michigan, and in Akron, Ohio, according to a recent survey by Leroy Jeffries of the National Urban League, there have also been efforts to secure this type of employment for Negroes, but so far without success.

On what is of perhaps equal importance to Negroes, the question of work in the telephone industry, there has been similar effort. Just as department stores have been hiring Negroes for a long time in menial capacities, so has the telephone industry; but until recently neither in a quantitative nor a qualitative fashion. According to a survey of the telephone industry, made by Julius A. Thomas, Director of Industrial Relations, National Urban League, there were only three thousand Negroes employed by the telephone companies represented in forty-four cities from which material for the survey was received. Some questionable factors are discounted and the report points out that 1800 is the more nearly accurate number of Negroes regularly employed; and that there are only approximately three hundred Negroes employed, in eighteen cities, as messengers, clerks, typists, and stenographers.

The question of telephone operators is a different matter. Negroes have for decades found it impossible to get jobs as central switchboard operators. Almost historical resistance has been met by Negroes in this connection. Hundreds of thousands of white high school graduates have happily found their first employment in this

occupation. Negro high school students in the past have not reached graduation with any hope of this type of white collar employment.

Progress

Today we can commend at least two telephone companies for changing their hiring policies to the extent of hiring a few Negroes as switchboard operators. I say "a few" because 250 Negro operators are only a few, among some 20,000 white operators in those two companies. Negroes are now working successfully as switchboard operators in nine cities, in two states. The Officers of those companies concerned have showed good business sense and commendable spirits.

That resistance of "downtown department stores" is no longer an unbroken line either. Since 1940, the situation has changed. In three states there are Negroes now employed as sales clerks in downtown department stores, in four cities. This represents one of the most important bits of progress. The sales job is a stimulating point of contact with the American public. Negroes employed at that point is stimulating progress.

Insurance Field

I cannot close without mentioning trends in two other fields that are important to the subject of this discussion. Insurance companies have for decades, perhaps centuries, (depending on your brand of economics), wielded one of the strongest economic influences on our country. Among several hundred substantial insurance companies in the United States, until a year and a half ago, Negroes found white collar employment only in those insurance companies founded by, operated by, and serving Negroes. Regardless of large Negro populations in cities where the Home Office of the largest insurance companies in America are located, those companies refused to hire Negroes as

white collar workers.

A dent is in that pattern now. Negroes are now employed as clerical workers in the home offices of two of the largest insurance companies in the United States. Carefully planned programs of integration preceded the hiring, and the management of each company is completely satisfied; as a matter of fact, "feels better."

Government Service

For many years it has seemed that members of minority groups have found civil service status to be a haven against the prejudicial whims of private employers and have thus moved toward governmental employment in disproportionately large numbers. Yet Negroes, who find discrimination against them worse than do the members of other minority groups, were in 1939, able to comprise only 8.4 per cent of the total number of persons employed by federal agencies. Of that number of Negroes ninety per cent were employed in custodial capacities.

A war "to eliminate fascism and nazism" brought some changes at home. By March of 1944, Negroes employed by the federal government in Washington had become 19.2 per cent of the total departmental agency employment rolls. Instead of 80 per cent as in 1939, 40 per cent were classified in crafts, protective, and custodial work, and 60 per cent were in clerical, administrative and fiscal, clerical mechanic, professional, and sub-professional positions. Our federal government has provided the most decided improvement in the whole white collar field of employment for Negroes.

An exemplary instance of this is found in the Office of Dependency Benefits in Newark, New Jersey. At the beginning of 1945, this branch of the War Department hired approximately 9000 employees. Two thousand of this number were Negroes and approximately

90 per cent of these two thousand Negroes were employed in clerical and supervisory capacities. Occupying a modern nineteen story air-conditioned office building, leased from one of the largest insurance companies of America, it demonstrated to that company (which was then refusing employment to Negro clerical workers) that the integration of Negro workers into whatever jobs they are capable of performing, makes for good business efficiency and good worker morale. White and Negro white collar workers worked under the supervision of white or Negro supervisors, and the government's business was transacted.

The Office of Dependency Benefits in the near future will move to St. Louis, this city. As a matter of fact, the first unit is scheduled to arrive here around November 1st. There is a challenge to St. Louis in this new acquisition. That governmental agency will bring to this city millions of dollars in employees' wages, and an increase in the importance of this business center. The ODB will bring to St. Louis employees who are used to working with, under, and over Negroes who are competent, qualified, and substantial American citizens. There is fear in some quarters that the mores of St. Louis might seek to exert some insidious influences on this just condition. The intelligent and responsible leadership of the city of St. Louis should rise up now, and at every appropriate point hereafter, and make clear to responsible officials that in St. Louis the democratic, fair, and equitable hiring practices of the ODB are welcome, and must be continued.

In conclusion, let us make no mistake about the gains of the War. Negroes realized quantitative progress, not qualitative progress. As so-called social engineers we cannot shut out our consciences, and feel secure and satisfied in the volume of employment among Negroes. The children of plantation families are employed. Yet, what happens to them, their spirits, their development?

Negroes have had jobs, numbers of jobs, and they performed their tasks satisfactorily. Negroes should be no longer without freedom of choice in job fields. The war for fair employment is not won. Our new battle line is in the white collar fields. Negroes must break through the white collar bottleneck, so that Negroes in America can give constructive expression to all of their best talents and abilities.

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